

# PROSTHETIC TERRITORIES

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## *Politics and Hypertechnologies*

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## POLITICS AND CULTURE

## Autotopographies

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**I**N 1973 CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI wrote the following letter, copies of which he then sent to the conservators of 62 museums: 'I should like you to exhibit in one room of your museum all the objects that surrounded a person during his lifetime and which, after his death, remain as witnesses of his existence. These objects ranging for example from the handkerchiefs used by the person to the wardrobe which stood in his room, should all be displayed in show-cases and carefully labeled.' He received 35 replies, and four museums implemented his plan."<sup>1</sup>

Clothing and cloth with all of its scents and residues; furniture with all of its bodily imprints, shapes, and sags from years of use; worn silverware and shoes: All of these serviceable objects receive the imprint of a human trace as the autonomy of their purely functional status is worn away by time. Used initially as prostheses (to cover and protect, to extend and support the body), such objects often become, after years of use, integrated so inextricably with one's *psychic body* that they cannot be replaced or removed without a subversion of the physical body itself. The same holds true for objects that function as prostheses of the mind. No less integral to the subject, such physical extensions of the psyche—trophies, photographs, travel souvenirs, heirlooms, religious icons, gifts—take the form of autobiographical objects. These personal objects can be seen to form a syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity—what I call an *autotopography*. Its own form of prosthetic territory, this private-yet-material memory landscape is made up of the more intimate expressions of values and beliefs, emotions and desires, that are found in the domestic collection and arrangement of objects. Such private collections can range from a formal home altar—complete with statues of saints, family photographs, and offerings of food—to the informal arrangement and display of memorabilia.

Although some of my recent writing includes a study of home altars and installation art,<sup>2</sup> the present text takes as its focus more secular forms of autoto-

pographies that can also be described as "museums of the self."<sup>3</sup> Existing along the continuum of monument and microcosm, this collection, arrangement, or storage of symbolically significant objects represents a personal identity in relation to a larger social network of meaning and functions to anchor the self-reflective image of the subject within a local, earthly cosmos. In the creation of an autotopography—which does not include all personal property but only those objects seen to signify an "individual" identity—the material world is called upon to present a physical map of memory, history, and belief. The autobiographical object thus becomes a prosthetic device: an addition, a trace, and a replacement for the intangible aspects of desire, identification, and social relations.

Space and time define the domain of "things"—a domain penetrated by human language in search of concrete and immortal signification. Taking a moment to name an object, one claims its power of presence; but the object always defies this claim by becoming lost, turning to dust, or, more often than not, "outliving" those who own it. As Grasskamp notes, "All the paraphernalia of furniture, tools, clothes, bags and cases, books, pictures, etcetera, etcetera which we drag around with us throughout our lives because we seem to need them, look like banal collections without the person for whom they possess some degree of utility. These demonstrations of the estates of deceased persons are not studies in sociology or archeology. In their concentration on individuals they rather touch upon the question as to what contribution *things* make to the *identity* of the person who possesses them, the question of the *biographical role of property*" (italics in original).<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that, at death, each individual will leave behind traces of his or her own autotopological path, comprising an array of very personal objects within a domestic landscape, such objects also are part of an important living practice.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the creation of an autotopography is, in each case, a form of self-representation. Just as a written autobiography is a series of narrated events, fantasies, and identifications, so too an autotopography forms a spatial representation of important relations, emotional ties, and past events. Within both modes of expression there are a multitude of forms. In the case of the autotopography, for example, a careful, visual arrangement of mementos and heirlooms, on the one hand, and a jumbled, hidden assembly of dusty and unkempt objects, on the other, can *both* constitute a material memory landscape. Each space preserves or gathers together objects that, whether they reflect pleasant memories or repress unhappy ones, ultimately form a visible and tactile map of the subjectivity. Found in boxes and drawers, on table tops, mantelpieces, and shelves, such collections most often include mementos and other indexical or symbolic traces used to create a metonymic link with past events and absent persons.

For the purposes of this chapter I have chosen the following example to illustrate the working of one such autotopography. In describing a piece of bone that

had been removed during an "extrapleural pneumothorax" operation, Roland Barthes writes,

For a long time I kept this fragment of myself in a drawer, a kind of body penis analogous to the end of a rib chop, not knowing quite what to do with it, not daring to get rid of it lest I do some harm to my person, though it was utterly useless to me shut up in a desk among such "precious" objects as old keys, a schoolboy report card, my grandmother B's mother-of-pearl dance program and pink taffeta card case. And then, one day, realizing that the function of any drawer is to ease, to acclimate the death of objects by causing them to pass through a sort of pious site, a dusty chapel where, in the guise of keeping them alive, we allow them a decent interval of dim agony, but not going so far as to dare cast this bit of myself into the common refuse bin of my building, I flung the rib chop and its gauze from my balcony, as if I were romantically scattering my own ashes, into the rue Servandoni, where some dog would come and sniff them out.<sup>5</sup>

Here the death of the object comes at the moment of its release from the confines of the autotopographical space of the drawer. Prepared to scatter his bodily remains and the memories associated with this corporeal sign, Barthes nevertheless clings to the other talismans of his past as though they were more integral to his life than his own bones. Those once "precious" items that continue to haunt the sacred reliquary of his desk—the schoolboy report card, the mother-of-pearl dance program—take on a meaning that lies far deeper than the layer of language that names them. Lingering on after the expulsion of the rib chop, their mere presence signifies a desire not to part with the past. Apparently used as mnemonic devices, these objects may also, however, act as a screen to veil a hidden memory or desire.

### Memory, Nostalgia, Souvenir

Memory, like identity, is a process of situating not unlike placing within an architectural model for our perusal those rooms, objects, events, and landscapes that we have encountered again and again in pacing through time. Umberto Eco remarks that "remembering is like constructing and then traveling again through a space. We are already talking about architecture. Memories are built as a city is built."<sup>6</sup> With each remembrance we adjust the space of the past, now adding, now removing images and events to suit our purpose. In this sense memory must be seen as constitutive rather than merely reflective. We use props to maintain the structure of this mental architecture. In his article "Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture," Mark Wigley writes of prosthesis that "it is a foreign element that reconstructs that which cannot stand up on its own, at once propping up and extending its host. The prosthesis is always structural, establishing the place it appears to be added to."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the mnemonic devices that make up an autotopography can thus be seen to *create a space* for the memory they repre-

sent. The past is reconstructed from a moment in the present to convince ourselves of something we wish to be or have been. The objects of memory, then, become a *spatial annex* to the mental images that, voluntarily or involuntarily, are projected into consciousness.

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust distinguishes between *intellectual* and *involuntary* memory—or *mémoire involontaire*.<sup>8</sup> The former is the type of mental recall characterized by Proust as “an exercise of the will,” those memories that are built not so much from personal experience as from social knowledge and reasoning. In contrast, the *mémoire involontaire*, as its name suggests, extends beyond the control of the subject to either solicit or reject its influence. Such memory, arising from a preconscious or previously unconscious state, is most often activated by an external force—an object. “The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect.”<sup>9</sup> Here the intangible aspect of memory becomes concretized in a bodily sensation triggered by an object. Of course both voluntary and involuntary memory may be at work in the construction of a single representation of the past. It is possible, for example, to think of two different movements that make up the work of reviewing the past: *memory*, which is an intrusion of the past into the present, and *remembering*, which is a retrogressive movement from the present into a reconstruction of the past—not unlike the “secondary revision” that takes place in Freud’s dreamwork. And just as in a dream, the material object may be the site of condensations and displacements of meaning.

The possible ambivalences and complexities that must underlie the selection and care of autobiographical objects can be described in part by Freud’s theory of the *screen memory*. Functioning to hide rather than reveal a traumatic moment, screen memories protect the individual from his or her own unconscious. Screen memory thus “owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed.”<sup>10</sup> This relation is usually one of metonymy: “It is a case of displacement on to something associated by continuity; or, looking at the process as a whole, a case of repression accompanied by the substitution of something in the neighborhood (whether in space or time).”<sup>11</sup> Such displacement may, as in the case of the fetish, create the need for what might be called a “screen object.”<sup>12</sup> Just as there are voluntary and involuntary memories, there are also intentional and unintentional devices of memory. The autotopography may, in other words, comprise artifacts that are designed to promote forgetting as well as remembering. As either catalyst or mask, herald or code, such objects will always provoke the subject to decipher them. In the process they act to tether desires and memories like a quilted loop on the surface of past experiences. The subject chooses (or is chosen by) a sign from the field of concrete signification and refashions this “objective object” into a

"subjective object."<sup>13</sup> By this act, the free fall of memory is anchored to significant moments that will be relived again and again.

Nostalgia is often the path to these frequented "sites." An emotional state pejoratively marked as excessive, nostalgia names one way in which the past is produced from a present yearning. It therefore may provide a clue to the nature and use of objects in the process of re-membling the self. In her article "Freud's Mnemonic: Women, Screen Memories and Feminist Nostalgia," Mary Jacobus suggests that nostalgia is a memory of that which never was. Just as for Freud certain forms of screen memory create the past from fears and desires of the present, for Jacobus the past represents a reworking of leftover materials, patiently turning over the personal detritus of memory that compose a woman's life ("bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps," shells, skeins of milkweed, petunia petals, seaweed, cats' whiskers, bird feathers). These are "the finest findings"—the mnemonics or *objets trouvés*—in which a woman "finds herself" where she is not. Memory is less "found" than fabricated. Consciousness is a patchwork rather than a seamless web. "Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity" or wholeness; it has to do with temporality and fragmentation.<sup>14</sup>

The same observation has been made by Susan Stewart. In her book *On Longing* she writes, "Nostalgia, like any form of narrative is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack."<sup>15</sup> Like the Lacanian notion of desire, nostalgia is always a desire for desire itself. An internally structured lack, nostalgia is the longing for an imaginary place, time, or event that, by definition, cannot be satisfied because it is the longing itself that structures this desire. An autotopography might thus comprise such material representations of longing. Robinson Crusoe marked time with objects he had constructed. The objects provided the truth of time; they were the source of the narrative of existence. And yet narrative is itself constitutive of the object's history. It is that which "bridges" the gap between past and present, memory and identity. Nostalgia is therefore that subjective state that arises in the recognition that this gap between signifier and signified, between the construction of a narrative and its referent, can never really be crossed. The belief in narrative as transparent and "unmotivated" allows for the belief in a "reality" that has, in fact, been ideologically constructed.

Kathleen Stewart, in her article "Nostalgia—A Polemic," traces the regional uses of nostalgia in the changing cultural landscape of the contemporary United States.<sup>16</sup> Contrasting the "mirage" of "artificial" environments (overbuilt architectural structures such as hotel and commercial complexes and reconstructed tourist towns) and the smaller scale spaces of "marginal" communities, Stewart outlines a theory of cultural decay and reconstitution that is based upon sites of narrative and objects of memory. She writes, "In positing a 'once was' in relation to a 'now' [nostalgia] creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing as-

pects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life. ... By resurrecting time and place, and a subject *in* time and place, it shatters the surface of an atemporal order and a prefab cultural landscape."<sup>17</sup> In this "prefab" landscape, which seems to leave little room for local community memories that once held such importance for personal identity "and where the self is a pastiche of styles glued to a surface, nostalgia becomes the very lighthouse waving us back to shore—the point on the landscape that gives hope of direction."<sup>18</sup> Here the activity of nostalgia is a looking back upon the past with the hope of finding an identity that, never having really existed, is still the only source of support for a present subjectivity. Without romanticizing the term, Stewart points to the various uses of nostalgia within "exiled" communities struggling for a sense of identity and place. Her anthropological analyses of "marginal" cultures in West Virginia reveal that such groups construct highly developed systems of material memory that serve to maintain local notions of self and place. For them, having a culture is a matter of people leaving their mark on the place; in turn, the place and its history leave "marks" on the people, even as bodily scars. The interiors of the houses, like the hills outside, are crowded with signs of the past. Rooms are filled to overflowing with "whatnots," and every inch of the walls is covered with nostalgic pictures of the dead and souvenirs of lost moments. The inhabitants seek a continuity in life by always piecing together what is always falling apart. Women piece together quilts from scraps of clothing, and in every scrap exists a memory and so a story.<sup>19</sup>

There are many communities that pursue this kind of activity. But it is most often those people in exile, from their native land or *within their own country*, who are in need of a locally produced representation of the past. Mainstream representations of cultural history do not include the nostalgic memories of "deterritorialized" groups. As a result, the autotopographies of immigrants, exiles, and minorities often form strong testimony, at the local or even personal level, of an ambivalent representation of identity in crisis. Objects that symbolically or indexically represent a "homeland," whether actual or ideological, in this case serve to support a communal notion of "self." Memories are made manifest in a material form. They obey the logic of decay but also are carefully preserved and located in a semiotic system of placement and display. In this context one could say that memories *take place* in a way that history does not.

Pierre Nora in "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire"<sup>20</sup> describes a need for private stories and local memories in the face of a cultural system that increasingly favors public histories. In so doing he suggests that memory is a dying practice; and because of its decline, with the subsequent rise of history, the sites of memory, or the *lieux de mémoire*, have become more poignant in their demand to be recognized. "These *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has been abandoned."<sup>21</sup> Although it is possible to see that memory—as well as amnesia—informs the social



construction of history, history cannot be read simply as a collection of memories. Memory and history do not exist on a continuum in which the former is a more personal and local version of the latter. Rather, each has a unique power over the experience of time; each produces a qualitatively different representation and organization of past events. It is therefore crucial to make distinctions among the ways in which material culture is called upon to serve each of these concerns. Nora writes,

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, in so far as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic—responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. ... Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again.<sup>22</sup>

Memory, then, is necessarily in a state of constant change. The dialectic of remembering and forgetting maps the path of internal revisions and debate. Memory is never fixed. In a culture heavily invested in factual histories, however, memory is relegated to specific locations and practices. History announces the immortal, monumental nature of its representations and—despite its practice—is *not* built on a paradigm of flexibility and reinterpretation. The mediation of history has made it impossible to conceive of the present in relation to a mutable memory. Instead, all activity becomes directed toward its own representation in the future. The present becomes conceived as “historical moment.” Art and artifacts are created for the sole purpose of claiming a place in a future history of the present.<sup>23</sup> In a culture where the present is “produced” primarily in the interest of its preservation for the future, history has eclipsed memory. It is out of this historicizing environment that *lieux de mémoire* are constructed. For, Nora claims, “There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.”<sup>24</sup> In the activity of contemporary Western cultures, history proclaims its authority over memory. To resist erasure, sites of memory undermine history’s seamless narratives by providing the material traces of a shifting symbolic and sacred relationship to things. More important, memory implies, as against history, that there are *multiple* stories to be told in an overlapping layering of signification that does not take place in a linear, linguistic, or necessarily coherent manner. On a microcosmic scale, then, an autotopography may be a *lieu de mémoire* that provides a personal revision of the totalizing narratives of history.

"Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gesture, images and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things."<sup>25</sup> It is in the tension between memory and history that *les lieux de mémoire* are created. Nora suggests that an object, archive, museum, monument, or even an individual can be considered a *lieu de mémoire*. This site of memory implies "a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to remembrance. The total psychologization of contemporary memory entails a completely new economy of the identity of the self, the mechanics of memory, and the relevance of the past."<sup>26</sup> I would like to suggest that the economy of this identity rests, in many cases, with the very gathering and collecting of material artifacts of an individual past that constitutes the autotopography. Pierre Nora and Kathleen Stewart provide an initial view into the need for this collecting and storing up of objects of memory and identity. Nora points out that "the defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of *lieux de mémoire*—that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them."<sup>27</sup>

One forms models of self-representation—in this case autotopographies—not only to reflect memories and desires but also to protect a threatened identity. Objects themselves function as *lieux de mémoire*, as material support to claims of specific and contingent identities that rely upon an open, flexible, and changing narrative. Memory cannot become fixed by the object, rather the object serves the purposes of memory by providing that necessary trace of something specific, individual, and redefinable. As Kathleen Stewart notes, "From here, resistance takes the form of making further inscriptions on the landscape of encoded things—inlays on the existing inscriptions—in an effort to fragment the enclosing, already finished order and reopen cultural forms to history."<sup>28</sup> A general lack of cultural memory within the public sphere of contemporary Western societies is felt and expressed through the individual interventions of memory as against history. "It gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity; when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means."<sup>29</sup>

One of the more common traps of memory is the object made or chosen specifically for this purpose—the *souvenir*. As the material site of memory, it creates a bond between the concrete particularity of the present and the seemingly intangible past. It does not, however, *unexpectedly* trigger memories from the depth of the past or the unconscious. Rather, it is intended from its very conception, and in some cases fabrication, to become the token for a particular individual or group. Indeed, it functions much like the Freudian fetish in its recreation of satisfaction, with an important difference. Unlike an heirloom, screen object, or fetish, a sou-

venir is acquired or kept by choice. The fetish is used to mask the event for which it is the representative; the souvenir is kept for the purposes of more clearly remembering the event. The fetish creates a *screen memory*; the souvenir is used to create a nostalgic memory.

In "The Refuges of Intimacy" Orest Ranum writes of the souvenir in early-modern France:

The souvenir-space (walled garden, bedroom, ruelle, study or oratory) and the souvenir-object (book, flower, clothing, ring, ribbon, portrait, or letter) were quite private, having been possessed by an individual unique in time and space. Nevertheless, the significance of such spaces and objects was encoded and perfectly comprehensible to others.

In the vocabulary of intimacy, the word souvenir, though not limited to memories of the passions, became the preferred word for them in the eighteenth century. It even acquired a double meaning, denoting both a memory and/or a common object such as a ribbon or combe that belonged to a loved one or a gift that expressed the identity of the giver or recipient. Through the exchange of souvenirs, the self became other and the other, the self.<sup>30</sup>

In this case the souvenir is located within a larger discourse of material communication. Because souvenirs were so easily recognizable as intimate objects, it was necessary to keep them hidden in such spaces as the ruelle (a concealed closet behind or beside the bed). Such an object might otherwise implicate its bearer in a network of passionate relations.

In the contemporary United States, mnemonic devices are more often used within the context of a personal historical narrative that has its own system or code of signification. It is for this reason that one person's well-loved and well-worn souvenirs will appear as so much junk to anyone else. This discrepancy reveals that the souvenir functions as one sign within a personally constructed code of signification. In each case, for each subject, the semantic or semiotic component of the sign is unique even if its form has, in addition, a socially recognizable meaning. Thus, the souvenir operates as part of a relatively solipsistic system of communication. As Susan Stewart notes, "Such souvenirs are rarely kept singly; instead they form a compendium which is an autobiography."<sup>31</sup> These autobiographical material artifacts that assert a presence of the past also locate individuals in that past—individuals who turn to these objects for the reassurance, indeed material proof, of having been a particular person in a particular place, time, and community.

The object thus also represents the imaginary body, a body that is both incomplete (because always changing) and overabundant (because it signifies all possible desires). It is only because of our own bodily existence, and our relation to the materiality of this body, that we are able to become emotionally invested in external objects that represent an important aspect of identity. But the relation to this prosthetic extension might be ambivalent. One writer has remarked, "I remember

how my familiar objects tortured me. They would transform overnight from cherished, adored figurines to nightmarish ghouls haunting me with familiarity. Once when I was eight I packed them desperately away, each in tissue into a box. I resisted the desire to destroy them all, to smash the china and plastic and wood figures into raging tiny, controllable pieces. I hid the boxes far underneath the bed and then sat on the edge of the mattress, looking at the absences, the holes in the familiar universe. I was terrified by their still presence under the bed, not sure how to escape them."<sup>32</sup> In this case, the autotopographical landscape, having become a haunting presence or witness of unbearable meanings, cannot be left to stand but must be transformed or destroyed to remove its reflective gaze.

### Narrative Traces

If recollection is "a process of emplotting the landmarks of one's life history as it is presently perceived,"<sup>33</sup> then this "emplotting" takes place both by marking out a physical, temporal map with objects and by creating a narrative plot that organizes these scattered pieces. The autobiographical nature of the souvenir is not often to be found in the object alone. It emanates equally from an accompanying narrative, an individual story line that is usually the result of a changing pattern of memories and identifications. Such a story line might be identified as what Hayden White has called a "mythic narrative," which "is under no obligation to keep the two orders of events, real and imaginary, distinct from one another."<sup>34</sup> The "mythic narrative" is contrasted by White with "historical representation," which "belongs to the category of what might be called 'the discourse of the real,' as against the 'discourse of the imaginary' or 'the discourse of desire.'"<sup>35</sup> Yet the discourses of the "real," the "imaginary," and "desire" become entangled in individual memory. As is the case with Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, a struggle between the desiring imaginary of memory and the concrete manifestations of "history" constitute the narrative of the "self." Time marks the struggle between the imaginary and the real with physical as well as narrative traces, traces that are not necessarily semantically anchored. Autobiography thus becomes an act of collection, arrangement, and authentication of objects as much as the construction of narrative that accompanies these activities. In this case, there is an equally strong demand upon an object to both provide historical "proof" of a particular occurrence and to allow for an imaginary development of narrative. The flexibility of the second is as important to the story as the rigidity of the first. It is in the interplay of these two types of recounting that the object finds its most powerful narrative force.

In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur links this notion of the autobiographical object to the narrative construction of individual identity through his theory of "traces": "People from the past left these vestiges. However they are also the products of their activities and their work, hence they are those things Heidegger

speaks of as subsisting and at hand (tools, dwellings, temples, tombs, writings) that have left a mark. In this sense to have passed this way and to have made a mark are equivalent."<sup>36</sup> The "mark" is testimony to the *having happened* of the past. In this sense it is not unlike the Peircian index. Ricoeur, however, reminds us to be aware of the problematic of time that makes up this relation. "In the first place, to follow a trace is one way of 'reckoning with time.' How could the trace left in space refer back to the passage of the sought-for object without our calculations concerning the time that passed between them, that is, between the passage and the trace I left? Immediately then, datability with its 'now,' 'then,' and 'earlier,' and so on, is brought into play."<sup>37</sup>

Although the trace remains, the world from which it came is absent. The trace thus has the unique ability to represent time as neither past nor present but as both simultaneously. "The act of following or retracing a trace, can only be carried out within the framework of a historical time that is neither a fragment of stellar time nor a simple aggrandizement of the communal dimensions of the time of personal memory; this is a hybrid time, issuing from the confluence of two perspectives on time."<sup>38</sup> It is as an embodiment of this "hybrid" time that the trace becomes interesting. In this sense any "trace" works like a photograph: It is a material representation of the disappearance of time. It is a spatial triumph over time. Thus the trace also functions much like bodily experience: materially present and enduring yet having had an existence in the past. The subject, like the object, is a material hybrid of time and, like the object, inhabits certain historical as well as imaginary narratives.

This process finds its culmination in what Ricoeur calls "narrative identity": "The fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity. Here "identity" is taken in the sense of a practical category. To state the identity of an individual or a community is to answer the question, 'who did this?' ... Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The subject then appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life."<sup>39</sup> History and fiction are thus mutually constitutive of an individual identity that exists in a "third-time" of present and past.<sup>40</sup> Stuart Hall, in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," outlines a similar notion of identity that is both importantly historical and simultaneously constructed through imaginative narration. He says of "cultural identity" that "It is *something*—not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories—and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break.' It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth."<sup>41</sup> In Hall's view there is also a tension between the "real, material" effects of history and the construction of "fantasy, narrative and myth."

The subject, like the material trace, "stands-for" a particular past insofar as that past can be read on or in the body and is reconstructed through a narrative that can only be told after the "fact" of the body. Race, ethnicity, and class are not originally chosen "traits," nor is biological sex. Moreover, these categorical distinctions form a material ground that resists individual and social redefinition. Thus myth and concrete existence mesh to produce a system of signification that must include both linguistic *and* material sign systems by recognizing their necessary overlap and *mutual constitution*. The object that serves as the narrative nodal point of an "individual" identity functions in the same manner. Each is a material trace that holds a particular historical status and yet can be understood only within the context of contemporary narrative. It is perhaps this similarity in ontological status that makes the material sign (souvenir, heirloom, photograph) a popular representative of personal history. Eugen Bär, in his article "Things Are Stories," writes, "Any mapping of the world into things is always relative to the subject doing the mapping (in German the phrase is 'die Welt ist subjektiv bedingt') and that means in this context that things tell, among other stories, also and maybe primarily the story of the subjects for whom they are things."<sup>42</sup> But the "story" of personal objects need not follow a tidy linear construction. Rather, it might be a series of unconnected associations that follow one from another, each aspect forming an image or meaning that rests in the mind without a plot—a narrative fragment, a piece of signification that might make up a narrative were it connected with other bits and pieces. Narrative is that which allows one to make sense of time in a fictional and historical sense. The object functions as the material site for an already developed narrative to be grounded or condensed, or as a fragment of a larger narrative for which it serves as one trace among others. This notion of associative relations is in agreement with Barthes's claim that "the object is polysemous, i.e., it readily offers itself to several readings of meaning; in the presence of an object, there are almost always several readings possible, and this not only between one reader and the next, but also, sometimes, within one and the same reader."<sup>43</sup>

Associative meanings that are attached to objects are thus as free and flexible as those attached to words; but the object itself, in its materiality, provides a resistance that seems, just as does the human body, to anchor more firmly, though not absolutely, its range of signification.

### The Collection of Identification

The autotopography as a whole is often seen as a coherent series of relations. Interviews conducted with several individuals have suggested that the collection and arrangement of objects, especially souvenirs and gifts, into a visible space creates a representative reconstruction of personal memory. In addition, however, these collections almost invariably contain images of respected or admired individuals,

as well as ancestors directly or indirectly connected to the life history of the individual. The microcosmic space of the autotopography is a phantasmal space where the subject can "keep company" with others by the juxtaposition of representative tokens and images. Roland Barthes's dusty but "precious" collection reveals the influence of his relationship with "Grandmother B." Placed in proximity with his schoolboy report card, the mother-of-pearl dance program and pink taffeta card case are associated with memories of his youth. They may be the traces of a cross-gendered identification with the grandmother herself. In this case, to "acclimate the death of the object" is also to acclimate the death or aging of the subject, who may be passing through his or her own "decent interval of dim agony."

Conversely, the autotopography is frequently a space of *utopian* identification and mythic histories—an idealized recreation of subjectivity that uses carefully selected artifacts as concrete evidence. During interviews I conducted with people who had purposely constructed an autotopography in the form of a home altar, it became clear that the juxtaposition of objects was a recreation of an idealized "self" in relation to a larger social community. In speaking of this more formal collection of objects one interviewee said:

These various objects either represent where I've been or where I would like to go. They either represent literal travels, of my self or people that have been close to me or they represent past relationships and what those relationships have meant. This is a way ... that I keep those memories alive and the way those people have touched me and formed me. And it is also about pushing myself to rethink certain concepts of myself; this is the place I can come to think about what my next move will be ... a move to the future. ... But these images, these are particularly images [that] in some way reflect who I am more than others. And there's a way that I want *that* to be a presence in my life ... having images around me that reflect who I am, rather than not, or how I envision what I am.<sup>44</sup>

In this case the autotopography creates not only a microcosmic representation of relations to a larger community of people but also a concrete mapping of a future vision. In this sense, the objects and images are used for the purposes of identification with others and with an ideal "self."

It is also possible to think of the autotopography as a space of adult "transitional objects." Not unlike in D. W. Winnicott's definition of the term, this possession becomes both an extension of the subject (a prosthesis of sorts) and a kind of soothing presence external to the subject.<sup>45</sup> One interviewee remarked:

Whenever I move—and I've moved a lot—whenever I move I know that everything is okay if I can find a spot to put my little things. It gives a sense of being able to settle and a sense of purpose there, a feeling of ground and a sense of home. ... So to me they are a way of grounding me. Since I seem to have traveling, wandering, in my stars, I've very rarely had a home. ... For me [these objects] have always been my roots—giving a sense of home and place and stability and that kind of thing. And be-



cause I have been so many places and had to make these little homes, I have always been very aware of those things that I trip over. To pick them up provides continuity and stability at the same time.<sup>46</sup>

The moment of personal or cultural transition, the movement from one place to another, from one role to another, can create the felt need to have certain objects that form a continuity between a previous life and a new life, a previous identity and a new identity. Certain books, articles of clothing, tokens, and symbols of the past—these become “transitional objects” that ease the passage from one psychic or physical state to another.

Thus, whether a conscious or unconscious process, the act of collecting a material representation of identity is highly motivated. Making a similar point in *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford points out that collection and preservation are always informed by politics and desire. He suggests that even private collections of objects eventually will be expected to conform to rule-governed, traditional categories of collecting.<sup>47</sup> And this expectation may indeed be pervasive. However, the autotopographies discussed here remain for the most part outside the domain of systematic collection and economic values of objects determined by the marketplace.<sup>48</sup> So unique are autobiographical objects that they cannot be readily sold, nor can they necessarily conform to the characteristics of a “good” collection. This does not preclude the possibility—or likelihood—that systematic and formal collections are also autotopographical. Books, coins, artwork, and all the other possible objects that form traditional, categorical collections quite often reflect the personal history and identity of the individual. The relation between the collector and the collected, in other words, is always to some degree autobiographical.

### Why “Autotopography”?

The notion of an autotopography, like Michel Foucault’s concept of *heterotopia*, marks the “countersites” that construct a “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live.”<sup>49</sup> A representation of memory and identity takes place in the physical sites of domestic and other private spaces where the gathering of artifacts becomes a reconstitution of personal and social history. Countering and conversing with the images available in the powerful realm of mass media, as well as drawing from the resources of life events and cultural identity, the autotopography lays out the reflection of private identifications and projected desires.

Each of the texts previously discussed elaborates one or more important aspect of the concept of material self-representation; taken together they begin to form an associational compendium of characteristics. Beginning with the architecture of prosthesis as the material annex of mental as well as physical phenomena, they



show that the spaces of the autotopography (the private corners of rooms, boxes, desks, drawers, and shelves) include the metaphorical architecture of memory as well. The representation of the past, it is suggested, evolves out of the mnemonic devices of both voluntary and involuntary memory: Both the nostalgic souvenir and the "screen object" make use of memory as the framework upon which to locate a material identity. Such objects taken from a larger social scheme of meaning are redefined in a private or local system of signification, causing the artifact to pass through a process of "subjectification." But the desire to remember, alone, is not enough to explain the need for an autotopographical space. Nostalgia, born from the sense of longing and lack that accompanies the loss of some cherished moment, person, or identity, is often the impetus behind the individual need for a mythic construction of the past based upon the desire for a different, idealized memory. The disavowal that defines nostalgia is thus allowed to contribute to the construction of memory, but not to that of history. Memory and history are observed to make equal demands upon the evidence of material culture while simultaneously making very *different* claims about the *status* of this evidence. Memory allows the object to have changing and multiple meanings, whereas history demands of the object a specific and single identity. Both discourses are present in the autotopography—and the narrative that accompanies this process is no less powerful for its being "mythic." The concept of the trace, as developed by Ricoeur, helps to support the thesis that an autotopography is a combination of "fictional" memory and "factual" history embedded in a material object. But more important, it is the representation of an identity that is also between fiction and history and between past and present that makes the autotopography a powerful tool of "evidence"—linking time, space, and event in a material manifestation of "self." This hybridity of time, which characterizes the ontological resemblance between body and object, also appears in the autotopography. The past and present of a personal or cultural identity can thus be relocated in a tangible space of icons, souvenirs, and other collected objects, each referring to specific sites and moments, psychic states and symbolic relations.

Within a growing number of academic disciplines, a focus upon material culture and representation (studies of museums, of collections, of property) reveals a renewed and continuing fascination with the physical world of the object (fetish, relic, historical artifact, and industrial product). Yet none of these studies have adequately accounted for the tactical act of self-representation at the level of intimate objects. The texts used here to elaborate the theory of the autotopography touch upon important aspects of this concept, but none see it as a total phenomenon—as a common yet subjective practice of making identity materially manifest. It is from the need to name this phenomenon, and by so doing to allow for a more detailed study of its forms and effects, that I have here introduced the concept of the *autotopography*.

## NOTES

1. Walter Grasskamp, "Artists and Other Collectors," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), p. 129.
2. Jennifer A. González, "Rhetoric of the Object: Material Memory and the Artwork of Amalia Mesa-Bains," *Visual Anthropology Review* (Spring 1993).
3. The "self" is a problematic term because of its multiple implications in the vocabularies of both humanism and ego psychology. However, the "self" for the purposes of this chapter can be thought of as an idea and an emotional matrix that is held in the mind of one person in relation to all the other institutional, linguistic, and cultural contexts of definition that make that person identifiable. The "self" is therefore hardly singular, for it is defined only in the context of multiply situated relations with other "selves" and communities. Yet it has a kind of *local position*, a point from which it radiates outward. This local position provides the ground of agency that is neither entirely singular nor evenly distributed within the political environment. Thus, to represent the "self" is a process that entails recognizing the complexity of this human matrix.
4. Grasskamp, "Artists and Other Collectors," pp. 129–130.
5. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), p. 61.
6. Umberto Eco, "Architecture and Memory," *Via* 8 (1986), pp. 88–94.
7. Mark Wigley, "Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture," *Assemblage*, no. 15, (1991), p. 9. Wigley also points out that in the teaching of both building and architecture, the concept of the collection was central. The clear and rational arrangement of diverse objects would legitimize their use as models of the external world for students of architecture. See p. 13.
8. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Swan's Way*, vol. 1, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1934).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
10. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3 (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), p. 320.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
12. The word "object" comes via Middle English from the Latin *objectus*, "something thrown before or presented to (the mind)" from the past participle of *obicere*, to throw before or against. The object is located in the presence of, but in opposition to, the subject. As mask or screen, the object is, in this sense, thrown in the path of the mind and can be seen either as an obstacle that hinders or as a sign that directs.
13. It might be interesting to think of this movement as similar to Lacan's notion of "quilting," which Žižek discusses in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. An object becomes the *point de capiton* within the chain of possible material signifiers; it becomes that which is the site of the passage of the Real to the Symbolic. Žižek writes, "The *point de capiton* is the point through which the subject is 'sewn' to the signifier, and at the same time the point which interpellates individual into subject by addressing it with the call of a certain master-signifier ('Communism,' 'God,' 'Freedom,' 'America')—in a word, it is the point of the *subjectivation of the signifier's chain*" (italics mine), p. 101.
14. Mary Jacobus, "Freud's Mnemonic: Women, Screen Memories and Feminist Nostalgia," "Women and Memory," special issue. *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1987), p. 138.

15. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 23.
16. Kathleen Stewart. "Nostalgia—A Polemic," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (August 1988), p. 227–241.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 235–236.
20. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7–25.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
23. See Philip Fisher's *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
24. Nora, "Between Memory and History," p. 7.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
28. Stewart, "Nostalgia," p. 232.
29. Nora, "Between Memory and History," p. 16.
30. Orest Ranum, "The Refuges of Intimacy," in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 3, *Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. Roger Chartier, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 207 and p. 232.
31. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 139.
32. Megan Boler, *Sistered Angels*, work in progress, 1992. This example contrasts with the observation made by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things* that usually, "for children [the bedroom] is a private area that gives a greater feeling of control over the activities and objects than other rooms and thus is a place where autonomy itself can be cultivated through 'dialogues' with the self, mediated by cherished possessions" (p. 137).
33. Patrick H. Hutton, "The Art of Memory Reconceived: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 3 (July–September 1987), p. 384.
34. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 3–4.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
36. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 119–120.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Cultural, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).
42. Eugen Bär, "Things Are Stories: A Manifesto for a Reflexive Semiotics," *Semiotica* 25, no. 3–4 (1979), p. 198.
43. Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang), 1988, p. 188.

44. Excerpt from an interview conducted in Santa Cruz, California, 1992.

45. See D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), p. 2.

46. Excerpt from an interview conducted in Santa Cruz, California, 1992.

47. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 218.

48. It is possible to think of such objects as functioning "allegorically"—within a loose etymological definition of that term. The two roots of allegory are highly suggestive: al-, the other of two, alias, alibi; Greek *allos*, other; ger-, to gather; Greek *agora*, the marketplace, or to speak publicly. From this, the "real" meaning of an object can be seen as *other than* its market value (its publicly advertised value). It is outside the market. Conversely the object can be seen as the *other of* the market—its alias or alibi. The market value (the exchange and use value) of an object is either *other than* the "true" meaning of the object, or it is intimately related to it *as its other* (as is the case with museum acquisitions). The allegorical is a structure that allows those things *gathered* in a place to have a meaning that expands beyond that place and yet is intimately tied to this placement or gathering itself.

49. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Places," *Diacritics* (Spring 1986).